

ALICE GARNER. *A Shifting Shore: Locals, Outsiders, and the Transformation of a French Fishing Town, 1823-2000*. ITHACA, NY: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2005. 286 PAGES.

Reviewed by Barbara Healy Stickel

In *A Shifting Shore: Locals, Outsiders, and the Transformation of a French Fishing Town, 1823-2000*, Alice Garner traces the transformation of a simple French fishing village into a popular resort destination. Intrigued by the realization that the beachside resorts she frequented often capitalized on their past as “fishing communities” and utilized fishing “paraphernalia” for décor, Garner set out to determine “when and how this romanticization had begun, and what it was like for the people pictured to become the object of a tourist’s fascination” (p. 6).

According to Garner, *A Shifting Shore* “required a familiarity with a broad body of literature, including geography and spatial theory, cartography, maritime history, fine arts, French literature, anthropology, sociology (incorporating leisure and tourism theory), architecture, planning, and the history of medicine” (p. 7). Accordingly, her bibliography reflects careful research—a fact that allows Garner’s discussion of various attempts to tame the marshes and other tidal areas by developers interested in exploiting the region to vividly demonstrate

how such transformation occurred. In doing so, she repeatedly demonstrates how, when the ultimate goal of resort building was financial reward for a select few and the entertainment, pleasure, and health of the elite, local interests and knowledge were rarely considered.

Garner also discusses the evolution of “bathing” in the sea—for both recreational and health purposes—pointing out that the existing “unregulated bathing habits of coast-dwellers” were ignored as the “great families” and other resort-going elite imposed a “new” practice of holidaying and sea bathing based on strict rules of etiquette. This early nineteenth century shift was the first step in displacing the fishing community from its traditional locale.

Surprisingly, while coastal inhabitants were described as an uncivilized, savage, and even moronic, people residing in an “exotic” locale, they were also regularly identified as a “must-see” attraction and considered one of the area’s major tourist attractions. Garner demonstrates the objectification of fisherfolk by pointing out that tourists felt free to “engage, ask questions, take a deep breath, and enter their living quarters,” as though fisherfolk existed solely for their personal entertainment. When it became apparent that tourists were not content to be mere “spectators,” cooperative fishermen were located and resort hotels began furnishing appropriate attire so that their guests could “help” with mostly-simulated fishing experiences.

Also interesting is Garner’s discussion of the ongoing battle between fishermen and resorts over the use of the beaches. Traditionally, fishermen would dry their nets and mend gear on the beaches. Although tourists loved to watch them work, the increasing numbers of tourists and eroding beaches increased competition for the beachfront—fishermen were confined to certain areas and were eventually “squeezed out” altogether.

While *A Shifting Shore* does document how the fishing village was transformed into a resort community, it does have its shortcomings. Garner explains how the development of jetties and promenades were intended to accommodate pleasure boating and beachgoers, for example, but she neglects to sufficiently explain how this change would have impacted the local fishing community—a long sea wall, after all,

would effectively block artisanal fishermen from the beach, thus prohibiting them from beaching their vessels. Additionally, while she does make a brief mention of how moorage was to be offered for some vessels, she neglects to explain that this “improvement” could create difficulties for the fishermen, who would undoubtedly be expected to pay rent for a spot to keep their boat.

Furthermore, although Garner’s use of photographs and postcards from the period helps readers visualize the transformation, her presumption that the various photographs of working fisherfolk were staged is probably correct, which takes away from their historic value. In reality, these images only demonstrate that certain members of the displaced fishing community were willing to pose for cameras, most likely for a fee. She also fails to mention that at the same time their physical locations were being usurped, most fisherfolk were likely struggling to survive the increased cost of living associated with the emergence of a resort community. Moreover, the influx of an economic elite into the community would also be likely to have consequences for fishing families, as their children came into contact with wealthier, more privileged children, and began to desire goods and opportunities previously unknown to them.

Finally, while Garner has written an interesting book that demonstrates how the lands around the fishing community were usurped by development and transformed to benefit tourism, she does not follow through with the second part of her thesis concerning the impacts of this transference on the fisherfolk. In her “Acknowledgements,” she does thank one individual for facilitating “interviews with elderly fishermen who were usually wary of journalist types.” However, the bibliography lists no individuals as sources—no fishermen are identified in the text and Garner does not reference any interviews with existing fishermen concerning “what it was like...to become the object of tourist’s fascination” (p. 6).

The most remarkable thing about this book, however, is how the story can be applied to any fishing community, to any littoral community, and, for that matter, any place in the developed world. It is unfathomable for most Californians to imagine life without “the

beach,” but the oldest homes found in coastal communities are not vacation homes, but fishermen’s shacks, sheltered from the sea.